

## **Precariousness and Protest: Negotiating Urban Refuge in Cairo and Tel Aviv**

By Irit Katz

Published in: Goldhill, S. (ed.), *Being Urban: Community, Conflict and Belonging in the Middle East*. Routledge.

In the winter of 2018, Tel Aviv's streets and squares were occupied by two large protests organized by one of the most destitute population groups in the city. At the end of February and again at the end of March, thousands of African asylum seekers, supported by Israeli residents, have demonstrated against Israel's plan to deport many of them in a government operation scheduled to begin in early April. In the first demonstration, over 20,000 people have marched through the streets of south Tel Aviv, one of the city's most neglected areas where many asylum seekers live, and the second rally of more than 25,000 took place at the central Rabin square. 'There is no difference between our blood and their blood because we are all human beings' was one of the slogans chanted together by the African and Israeli protesters, who also carried signs quoting Jewish texts about loving the stranger (Lidman, 2018; Yaron, 2018). Shortly after these protests the planned mass deportations were suspended by the High Court of Justice and eventually were cancelled by the government.

More than a decade earlier, in the winter of 2005, a smaller yet much longer protest has occupied the Mustapha Mahmud square in Cairo, when Sudanese refugees have gathered to demand the improvement of their protection and living conditions in Egypt (Whitaker, 2005). The peaceful sit-in of about 2,000 refugees was held in front of the offices of the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, located in the Cairo's affluent Mohandeseen neighbourhood, where the refugees have created and operated a makeshift camp considered to be one of the largest urban protest camps in the history of Egypt (Pascucci, 2017). After three months of the refugees' protest which was socially and materially supported by local residents, Egyptian security forces coming to evacuate the demonstrators have opened fire on the crowd, killing dozens and detaining hundreds, a violent event denoted as the Mustapha Mahmoud Park Massacre.

These events in these two cities seem to be unrelated. Not only they have happened in two Middle Eastern urban contexts that are hardly discussed in relation to one another, they are also separated in more than thirteen years and had a very different outcome. Yet these events could also be seen as closely connected in both their geopolitical context and in their urban meaning. As Tel Aviv and Cairo are two central cities of neighbouring countries, their regional connection is related to the sequence of these events; following the Mustapha Mahmoud massacre many refugees felt they are no longer safe in Egypt and decided to cross the Sinai desert and seek asylum in Israel, initiating a growing stream of African asylum seekers to the country and eventually leading to the events that sparked the Tel Aviv protests (Sabar and Tsurkov, 2015). But importantly, these events of public assembly of forced migrants in their cities are also tightly connected in their shared political and urban meaning. While happening in different national, urban, and socio-political contexts, they reveal not only the important function of the city as place of refuge, which could indeed often be precarious and contested, but they also reveal the key role of urban public spaces in the ways urban refuge is being negotiated. In the public spaces of both Cairo and Tel Aviv, vulnerable forced migrants came together, with the solidarity of local residents, to protest against their precarious realities and to articulate a political claim for their basic human rights and to be protected. From a population group which is often 'hidden and exposed' (Pavanello et al., 2010), these urban public events of protest have enabled them to become

visible and more protected, at least for a while, with the urban environment itself allowing their claims to be articulated, seen and heard.

By reflecting on the protests of refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo and Tel Aviv, this chapter examines the central role of the city as both a place of refuge and as a place where political claims on the conditions of refuge could be articulated and negotiated, at least to a certain extent. I will begin by examining the precarious situation of forced migrants in Cairo and Tel Aviv, examine the urban protests in both cities, conclude by examining the key role of the city in creating a public space where residents could come together, protest against their predicaments, and articulate a political demand to change their realities.

### **Precarious urban refuge**

Today, as the world becomes urbanized and the extent of forced displacement worldwide reaches the unprecedented number of more than 70 million people (UNHCR, 2019a), the subjects of urbanisation and refuge become inherently linked. As forcibly displaced people increasingly find refuge in cities - currently over sixty percent of the world's refugees live in urban areas – academic debates are slowly catching up in examining the complexities around forced migrants living in the city (Azis, 2014; Darling, 2017; Landau, 2018). The issue of refuge is usually analysed through the prism of the nation-state, while camps are often seen by states and international organisations as the 'proper' spaces for refugee populations (Kibreab, 2007). Within the imaginaries of 'seeing like a state', which are marked by the imposition of a rational, singular and consistent order from above (Scott, 1998), the objectification and abjection of forced migrants in designated spaces such as refugee camps and detention camps are used to reify state sovereignty (Katz et al., 2018). In contrast, urban refuge and its related approach of 'seeing like a city' suggest the multiple and incomplete crafting of alternative forms of order in practice (Magnusson, 2011) and offer more relational and flexible approaches to questions of sanctuary (Derrida, 2001; Darling, 2017).

Cities, however, also present ample of risks for forced migrants who often face precarious realities while being vulnerable to exploitation and legal predicaments. While within the urban realm displaced people can potentially live autonomously and carve out new spaces and realities for themselves, as destitute foreign population they also often suffer from xenophobic violence and social and economic hardships while often being forced to compete with the poorest local populations on the worst jobs and living conditions. Indeed, forced migrants in the city are mostly discussed in relation to their precarious situation, examined as exposed, forgotten, and hidden without proper protection (Marfleet, 2007; Pavanello et al., 2010). The situation of the urban refugees in Cairo and Tel Aviv, particularly around the respective urban protests of 2005 and 2018, must be considered in relation to these prevalent urban realities while also in relation to the uncertainties around their particular situation in the Egyptian and Israeli contexts and their specific urban realities.

#### *Forced migrants in Cairo*

Egypt has long been a destination and transit country for forced migrants, most of whom live in urban areas, and Cairo has become a regional hub of one of the largest and most diverse populations of urban refugees in the world (Marfleet, 2007, 40). Currently there are more than a quarter of a million of refugees and asylum seekers of 58 different nationalities registered with UNHCR Egypt, and while today most refugees are from Syria, most others are from countries in East Africa (UNHCR, 2019b). This figure, it is important to highlight, does not include those forced migrants who are not registered with the UN office yet live in refugee-like conditions which are estimated in significantly higher numbers. For example, on 2006, estimates of Sudanese in Egypt ranged by various sources from 2.2 million to 4 million, yet according to UNHCR Cairo only 72,000 persons applied for asylum between 1997-2004, of whom 73 percent were Sudanese (Grabska, 2006; Häkli et al., 2017). The UNHCR refugee

status is the only legitimate institutional identity these forced migrants can have. Without it they are, in their own words 'nobody, stripped of their country and deprived of recognition as social and cultural beings' (Coker, 2004). Most Sudanese asylum seekers have arrived in Egypt from the Darfur region following the Second Sudanese Civil War waged between 1983-2005 in which 1.9 million Sudanese civilians were killed and more than 4 million were displaced. The number of arrivals has significantly increased since 2003, when the war in the Darfur region has escalated into genocide, an important background when considering the 2005 protest discussed in this chapter.

Differently from policies of many other countries in the Middle East and Africa which host refugees in camps, there were almost no refugee camps hosted on Egypt's territory, although it is one of the few MENA countries to have signed the Geneva Convention on refugees. Refugees in Egypt therefore tend to settle in cities as part of state and international policies which promote the integration of refugees into urban environments while encouraging economic self-reliance (UNHCR, 2014) policies. Yet urban refugees in Egypt, similarly to others around the world, suffer from multiple hardships related to lack of protection and livelihoods. While receiving Egyptian health and education services, the support offered by the UNHCR and other organizations is limited. As it is difficult for refugees to obtain Egyptian work permits they suffer from high unemployment rates; there is also lack of efficient police protection which exposes refugees to violence, including that of traffickers and xenophobia; and many can find accommodation only in small overcrowded apartments in Cairo's poorest neighbourhoods while, due to the precariousness of their legal status and to social discriminations, landlords often charge them extortionate rent (Häkli et al., 2017). Cairo's refugees are also exposed to the complex material, economic, social, political and cultural discriminatory networks that make part of urban life (Häkli et al., 2017). In addition to the difficulties of being away from their home countries and familiar environments, they also share the local urban precarious life and daily struggles for food, water, shelter and against police violence characterizing everyday life in the city's deprived neighbourhoods (Grabska, 2006; Bayat and Denis, 2000). In addition, urban refugees are also exposed to inconsistent institutional state and international policies towards them which include deportation, arbitrary detention, or the suspension of the UNHCR 'status determination procedures', as one of the reasons that sparked the 2005 protest.

#### *Forced migrants in Tel Aviv*

The precarious situation of forced migrants in Tel Aviv, while should be considered in relation to the situated politics, policies and practices of this particular group in Israel, is not dissimilar to the realities in Cairo and is also connected to the events in the neighbouring country. Between 2006 and 2013 Israel has been a primary destination country for thousands of forced migrants originated mainly from Eritrea, Sudan and other East African countries, who arrived – mostly smuggled or trafficked through the Sinai desert – through Israel's southern border with Egypt (Paz, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the breakup of the 2005 Sudanese protest in Cairo is regarded as the event which initiated the major movement of forcibly displaced people from Egypt to Israel (Yacobi, 2011, 52). Until 2006 the issue of asylum seekers in Israel was a neglected area of policy concern and no Israeli refugee law was drafted, and the influx of refugees during that year has focused public and institutional attention on the issue (Paz, 2011, 5). The settlement of African asylum seekers in Israeli cities was and still is seen by Israel as threatening to the state's sovereignty and ethnic composition by jeopardizing its ability to manage the population according to its ethnocentric logic.

Initially Israel did not come up with a clear policy towards the situation, but incorporated a range of accommodating deterrence measures which shaped a sense of non-policy, differently described as 'chaotic bureaucratic ambiguity' (Afeef, 2009, 11), 'governmental

ambiguity of control mixed with a refusal for any long-term responsibility' (Yacobi, 2011, 57), and a deliberate approach of 'ordered-disorder' shaped by a 'consistent logic intended to make asylum claims unsustainable' (Paz, 2011, 5). When African asylum seekers have crossed the border they were usually picked up by the Israeli army and detained in Ketziot, a detention facility in the Negev desert near the Egyptian border. The facility was created to accommodate only 1,000 people and later enlarged to accommodate 2,500, yet because of the pace of arrivals there was a need to release detainees in order to make room for new ones. Following a 2008 governmental decision to give work permits to some of the asylum seekers, many were released and taken by evening buses that dropped them in the Central Bus Station near the Lewinsky Park in south Tel Aviv. There, some NGO activists and occasional friends and relatives would gather to meet those arriving in the big city, often with only the clothes they wore, while many had nowhere to go and had to sleep rough in the park for days and weeks (Yacobi, 2011, 57). These coordinated journeys, from Israel's peripheral desert border area to one of the most marginal areas in the state's largest and most central city, were a governmental action that soon greatly influenced the social, ethnic, and cultural . South Tel Aviv, with the constant stream of new arrivals in need, became even more overburdened by those sent there by the state with no adequate support, and the area's already poor institutional and infrastructural systems struggled to cope.

Tel Aviv municipality have begun supporting asylum seekers with basic services such as education and shelter through Mesila – a municipal Aid and Organization Centre for Migrant Workers and Refugees in the city. Many asylum seekers have stayed in temporary shelters in south Tel Aviv run by Mesila and local NGOs in difficult physical and sanitary conditions and later moved to rented flats in the area, which were often overcrowded. While some have begun working in the city formally and informally, others have opened small businesses, mainly in Neve-Sha'an street in the area. Local Israeli residents of south Tel Aviv have supported asylum seekers in the city, while others have protested against their presence, calling against the changing spatial, social and cultural character of the streets, public parks and playgrounds in the area. While Asylum seekers have moved to live and work in other cities such as Eilat, Arad, and Jerusalem, the majority stayed in south Tel Aviv where they hoped to find employment while relying on social networks of care and support which were already established by African foreign workers in the city (Yacobi, 2011, 58).

Yet not long after the decision of the Israeli government to place the asylum seekers on Tel Aviv's margins, many who had already succeeded to find their footing in the city found themselves living on borrowed time. Following 2008 publications on the overcrowded Tel Aviv shelters, occurring not long after the state has begun transporting asylum seekers by busses to the city with no adequate support, the then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have rendered all asylum seekers as 'infiltrators' who therefore must be imprisoned, initiating a wave of arrests in the city (Lifshitz, 2008). Another way to push asylum seekers outside Tel Aviv was to limit their work permits only to peripheral cities – Northern of Hadera and Southern of Gedera – cities which frame the Tel Aviv metropolitan area to its north and south respectively. These actions have turned the city to what Lebuhn refers to as 'local border control' (2013, 38), re-scaling and translating border enforcement measures and policies from the nation-state context to specific urban areas, while marking cities as central sites of the penetration of border regimes into everyday life (Varsanyi, 2008). Tel Aviv has thus become an urban space of uncertainty, insecurity, and threat for those who were hiding away from the policing forces of migration control while struggling to remain in the city.

The increasingly explosive mood on the subject was manifested in a 2012 demonstration against asylem seekers in Tel Aviv followed a claim by then prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu that 'illegal infiltrators [were] flooding the country' and threatening Israel's 'national security', 'national identity' and 'the social fabric of society'; Tel Aviv, declared

Netanyahu, had been 'invaded by Africans', promising to the demonstrators it 'will be returned' to its Israeli residents. Around 1,000 demonstrators waving signs saying 'Infiltrators, get out of our homes' were told by Israeli Member of Parliament Miri Regev that the 'infiltrators' were 'a cancer in our body' while the event escalated to violent attacks on Africans in Tel Aviv and their businesses (Sherwood, 2012). Minister of Interior Eli Yishai, has stated that until I will have the possibility to deport them, I will imprison them and make their lives intolerable', adding that 'the threat of the infiltrators is not less serious than the Iranian threat' while ordering the Authority for Immigration and Population to begin mass arrests of asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea (Efraim, 2012).

From 2013 until recently, the number of asylum seekers living in Israel has slowly decreased – from more than 64,500 who entered the country mainly until 2013 to 32,600 asylum seekers living in the country in 2019. Three related factors are part of this situation. First, in 2013, Israel built a 245 km-long security fence along its border with Egypt, dramatically reducing the entrance of asylum seekers into the country (from 17,276 entering in 2011 and 10,441 in 2012 to 43 in 2013; see PIBA 2018). At the same time, Israel has constructed a designated detention camp named Holot (Hebrew for 'sands'), near the Ketziot prison complex, a holding facility which its undeclared purpose was to create a constant pressure and intimidation of detainment to push asylum seekers to leave Israel. In addition, Israel used this intimidation and other policies to 'encourage' asylum seekers to leave to African countries through a 'voluntary programme'.

The creation and function of the new Holot desert camp, planned as the world's largest detention facility designed for the mass-incarceration of no less than 11,000 people while opening with the capacity to detain 3,000, was inherently related to the lives of asylum seekers in the city. The camp's official aim was to prevent asylum seekers from settling in Israeli urban areas: Holot 'intended to serve clear and distinct social interests relating to Israel's sovereignty and its ability to deal with the consequences of the settlement of thousands of infiltrators in its cities', with the Israeli High Court of Justice urging that 'the objective of [...] "alleviating the burden" on cities, especially south Tel Aviv [...] a legitimate objective' (HCJ, 2014). With this ruling, the court legitimized the state's coercive policy of urban expulsions, making Holot the official space to which non-citizens were banished from the civic space of the city to pacify the rage of other urban residents protesting against a specific population as well as years of institutional neglect. This action denied the asylum seekers not only the 'right to the city' (Harvey, 2008) through its shared production, but the ability to exist in the city in any form, with the state's clear yet unofficial intention to make the lives of asylum seekers so miserable that they would leave the country 'voluntarily' (Drori-Avraham, 2015).

As those detained in Holot were not allowed to resettle in cities like Tel Aviv and Eilat, and as asylum seekers detained in the camp were sometimes persuaded to leave the country, the camp became the black hole into which people were sucked from their urban everyday life, never to return. The court, which limited the detention from an indefinite period to one year, acknowledged the camp's influence on asylum seekers even when they were not detained there, recognising 'the tortuous path of "revolving doors", meaning removing infiltrators from city centres, transferring them to the outskirts of the desert [...] then returning them to city centres, while at the same time, taking others out of city centres "to fill their places" in the residence centre [Holot camp]', raising concerns whether behind the declared objective of preventing settlement in urban centres lies the objective of hazing and breaking the spirit of infiltrators (HCJ, 2014). Indeed, Holot had an immense effect on detainees who had already developed a life in their cities and were banished to a distant Kafkaesque 'penal colony' which sent its long arms to the everyday urban lives of an entire population. Holot did not only crush the urban life of those detained there but also

dismantled the urban mutual support and aid mechanisms created by asylum seekers, such as a Sudanese community centre in Tel Aviv and its operated kindergarten which were closed after those who maintained it were detained in the camp.

The life of the African refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo and Tel Aviv, it is clear, were and still are highly precarious. This is not only the form of the increasing 'precaritization' (Lorey 2015) of contemporary urban life, when neoliberal governmental and economic institutions provoke a higher sense of disposability and 'establish every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious' (Butler, 2015, 14). Rather, this is due to precariousness which is structured within the nation-states' citizenship and legal system, when those who are legally regarded as citizens enjoy certain rights (the right to freedom, security, mobility, work, welfare, healthcare, education), which are often denied of non-citizens who find themselves outside the state's institutional definitions and legal codes.

### **Protesting for protection**

It is against this lack of basic protection that the protests in Cairo and Tel Aviv have evolved, while these events have also developed around specific institutional decisions that increased the level of precariousness of forced migrants in these cities.

The duality of being part of the city and at the same time being excluded from it by various actors, has created an ongoing urban practice of protest among refugees in Cairo (Häkli et al., 2017). The most known example is one of the largest public protests in the history of Egypt and one of the most significant events in the history of migrant and refugee mobilization in the Mediterranean (Moulin and Nyers, 2007; Ramadan and Pascucci, 2018) is the 'Mustapha Mahmud protest' after the park and the adjacent mosque where it took place. The protest camp which was created by Sudanese refugees was strategically created in September 2005 in front of the UNHCR office in Cairo, in the affluent Mohandeseen neighborhood in Giza. The protest has emerged as a reaction to the aforementioned decision of the UNHCR to suspend all procedures for status determination for Sudanese applying for refugee status following the 2005 signature of the Sudan peace agreement, a status without which refugees felt as completely stripped of any recognition and protection. The protest began following a sit-in assembly initiative, functioning as an urban instrument for political visibility and mobilization. The statements of the protestors proclaimed that 'because of racial discrimination and no protection from it, and the lack of the right to work, health, and education, we can see no possibilities of our integrating into Egyptian society, even temporarily', urging the UNHCR to improve their situation and 'pursue resettlement for as many of the most vulnerable cases as possible (Refugees in Towns, 2018).

The protest camp rapidly grew to become a complex movement counting on both local and transnational networks of solidarity. Around 2,500-3,000 Sudanese forced migrants from various social, ethnic and religious backgrounds have lived in the camp for over three months, during which it has 'existed as nearly self-sustaining city' (Pascucci 2017, 290) with well-organised spaces such as communal kitchens, schools, clinics, a market, and communication technologies. Local NGOs have facilitated the donations of blankets, food and money for the protesters and sustaining informal infrastructures that enabled the camp to become a living environment for thousands. They also allowed it to function as a highly visible political space which its demands are communicated well beyond its immediate surroundings (Pascucci 2017, 297). The urban location of the protest was also meaningful. Residents in the upper middle class Mohandeseen neighbourhood have provided donations and allowed protesters to access water, food and bathrooms. The proximity of the protest to the Mustapha Mahmud mosque was also significant, allowing the protesters to rest in the mosque's courtyard and prayer rooms and to become beneficiaries of *Sadaquah* (charity).

The protest camp environment and its quickly-developed communal infrastructures became a concrete and immediate alternative to the precarious livelihood strategies and housing solutions of the Sudanese refugees in Cairo, providing temporary yet essential relief for its inhabitants from the acute homelessness issues of many of them. As noted by Pascucci (2017, 293), the fact that many refugees who joined the protest have moved to the camp with their families and belongings while reporting on the experience of housing problems, is significant. The protest camp became fundamentally a political act through the occupation of urban public space and its reversal to an alternative communal living environment, an action which brought the refugees' political call to the attention of the public. The protest camp's fragile form of existence and material politics, which also had 'practical' purposes of temporarily alleviating the everyday precariousness of refugees in the city, have also exposed the problematic system of urban self-reliance of refugees which in many cases causes even more destitution than the basic humanitarian relief provided in refugee camps.

The protest's interconnections with the city, however, subject to spontaneous support and institutional violence, do not only expose the political potentials but also the limitations of its urban context, resulting in many deaths of women, children and men – between twenty-seven to over one-hundred have died, figures are contested and uncertain – when the protest camp was forcefully evicted by Egyptian security forces (Marfleet, 2007, 42). The violent events in Cairo that have erased the Mustapha Mahmud camp, as Marfleet argues, have expressed an 'official intolerance towards desperate people who dared to challenge their lowly status: when they mobilized as social/political actors the state took punitive measures, determined that they should be neither seen nor heard' (2007, 31). Yet despite these violent state actions, refugees in Cairo still continue to act through a significant spatial dimension of public protest camps and sit-ins in various places in and around the city (see Häkli et al., 2017). While this camp left no tangible urban traces, its intangible political traces in the city still exist today.

The 2018 protests in Tel Aviv have also followed not only long years of precarious urban living but also a specific governmental decision on mass deportation of African asylum seekers from Israel. The continuing decisions of the court to limit the state's actions to encourage the 'voluntary' deportation of African asylum seekers have met increasing rage among some south Tel Aviv Israeli residents who expressed their anger in demonstrations in the city. If Holot was a place of concern for the court, for the Israeli protesters the facility was not efficient enough to deal with their transformed urban reality. At the end of 2017, the government approved a plan to close the camp and begin a systematic deportation of asylum seekers to third countries, namely Rwanda and Uganda, with those refusing would face indefinite imprisonment.

Following this governmental decision, however, the city showed its protective side. The government's announcements met with a wave of petitions and protests with a significant number of Israeli NGOs and residents calling against the deportations and participating in repeating demonstrations of civic solidarity which filled the streets and squares of south and central Tel Aviv and other cities. The mass demonstrations were broadly depicted by the media, showing photos of south Tel Aviv streets and Rabin square filled with asylum seekers and Israelis, including many residents of south Tel Aviv standing in solidarity while calling to support asylum seekers rather than deporting them. The signs carried by African protestors who coloured their faces white, saying 'Now I'm white – will you deport me?' and 'deported to death because I'm black', emphasised the racial aspect behind the planned deportation, while the mix of black and white protestors has made it clear that many population groups in the city stand together with the asylum seekers and backing their demands. While Holot closed in mid-March 2018 with the government intention to begin the mass deportation in April, following the demonstrations, Rwanda's clear objection to transferring forced

migrants unwillingly, and a court order, the mandated mass deportations never materialised.

In both Cairo and Tel Aviv the forced migrants took to the streets demanding protection. While the voices of these population groups are rarely taken into account due to their extreme marginality as people without citizenship the decisions of the UNHCR in Egypt and the Israeli government to reduce even more their minimal protection have pushed them to come together in the public spaces of their cities and claim for minimal rights and justice. The city, as shown above, is often a precarious place of refuge where there is lack of adequate support for a population which is often extremely vulnerable. Yet, when reflecting on these events of public assembly in which political demands were articulated together with acts of solidarity between different urban populations, the key role of the city as a place which may provide the spatial, social and political foundations for such protests and the anticipated change that they foster, must be considered.

### **Cities of protest**

Public assembly is a powerful political action. As Judith Butler argues, 'asserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living, is already an expressive action, a politically significant event' (2015, 18). By showing up, standing, marching, camping and speaking together in protest, an assembly forms 'a concentrated bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity' (Butler, 2015, 8) that puts adequate life at the forefront of politics with an effective result of manifesting the understanding that a situation is shared. By doing so assemblies contest the separation of social groups into individuals that deal separately with their structured precariousness and reconstitute plural forms of social practices of resistance and agency while enabling others to express solidarity. Such provisional assemblies, taking place outside parliamentary modes of spoken and written contributions, make a public call for justice which "says" that these assembled bodies, even if they stand silently without articulating any clear message, are not disposable.

These assemblies which form and perform a political action arguably create what Hannah Arendt describe as a 'space of appearance', a space 'which comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action' (1958, 199). In his analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, Nicholas Mirzoeff contends that space of appearance is not a political or cultural representation, but the very possibility of direct appearance. To appear, he argues, means 'to claim the right to exist, to own one's body [...]. To appear is to matter [...] to be a person that counts for something. And it is to claim the right to look, in the sense that I see you and you see me, and together we decide what there is to say as a result' (2017, 18). This is well reflected in the Cairo and Tel Aviv protests, when the bodies of the African forced migrants identified not only by signs and voices but by the sheer colour of their skin have assembled to show their joint struggle against policies that stripped them of their minimal protection.

Yet the power of the assembled bodies is also based on the conditions that enable them to come together and appear in a way that their claims will be seen, heard and taken into account. For Arendt, the condition for political action is plurality, the idea that people must act in concert, with the space of appearance preceding all forms of government and all formal constitution of public space. The space of appearance is not an architectural given. Unlike the tangible and enduring architectural and urban spaces which are the work of our hands, the space of appearance does not survive the actuality of the movement of people coming together but disappears when the particular political activities themselves cease. But for the very possibility for the space of appearance to emerge there must exist a public realm. For this, according to Arendt, the space of the city is instrumental.



The term 'public', for Arendt, means that whatever appears in public can be seen and heard by everyone and therefore constitutes reality (1958, 50). 'Public' also signifies the human world itself, 'in so far as it is common to all of us' (p.52). The 'public realm, as the common world', for Arendt, 'gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak' (Ibid.). This public realm is inherently linked to a tangible and permanent man-made world which is depended on a continuity that transcends the life-time of a mortal man. 'The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die', transcending our lifespan into both past and future and 'what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us' (p.55). For Arendt, what keeps the public realm in existence as a potential space of appearance is power, while importantly, the 'only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people', (p.200) a condition which is inherently linked to the city. 'Only where men live so close together', argues Arendt, 'that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundations of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power' (p.201).

The cities of Cairo and Tel Aviv were indeed instrumental for the protest of the forced migrants. Not only these cities facilitated the material and human support that enabled the protests to happen, but crucially these cities have provided the public realm in which the claims articulated by the forced migrants could be seen and heard by others and therefore had the potential to influence their realities. The protests were also foregrounded in the possibility of solidarity of fellow urban residents centred on common experiences of the city across otherwise distanced constituencies, common urban experiences enabled by a shared public realm. These events united individuals across different status while enabling them to reimagine the city 'as not a bounded object to be welcomed to or excluded from, but rather as a relational and collaborative production of those present at any given point' (Darling, 2017). These urban possibilities for social and political exchange and creation are often being regarded as the 'right to the city' (Harvey, 2008). In both Cairo and Tel Aviv – while bearing in mind the radically different outcomes of these protests, these events have enabled, at least temporarily, to turn the city from a space of 'policing' to that of 'politicizing' as part of the struggle over the right to exist, be protected, and be able to fully participate in urban life.

### **A conclusive remark**

Through the lens of urban protests of African refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo and Tel Aviv, the city could be seen as a complex and contradictory environment of precariousness and support, control and freedom, hostility and solidarity, of a political desert which could be turned into a meaningful political space. Looking at the evolving relations between forced migrants and their cities of refuge allows to understand how different societies both embrace and turn away from questions of sanctuary, a duality which is enacted and materialised in urban environments. 'If the name and the identity of something like the city still has a meaning', asks Jacques Derrida, 'could it, when dealing with the related questions of hospitality and refuge, elevate itself above nation-states or at least free itself from them (s'affranchir), in order to become, to coin a phrase in a new and novel way, a free city (une ville franche)?' (2001, 9). As global processes of increasing urbanization and increasing forced displacement are happening at the same time, cities could be imagined as places which accommodate sanctuary as a prominent urban virtue that may reshape new state and global approaches to this acute human and political issue. Rethinking what being urban means today also means to continuously engage with this question and with the ways cities, in many forms, actions and contexts, could become true places of refuge.

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